



# Disclaimer labels on fashion magazine advertisements: Impact on visual attention and relationship with body dissatisfaction<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Globally there is increasing advocacy for the implementation of laws requiring disclaimer labels to be attached to media images that have been digitally altered, with the goal of reducing the known negative effects of exposure to unrealistic thin ideal imagery for women. The current study used eye tracking technology to establish how digital alteration disclaimer labels affect women's visual attention to fashion magazine advertisements, and the interrelationship with body dissatisfaction and state appearance comparison. Participants were 120 female undergraduate students who viewed four thin ideal advertisements with either no disclaimer, a generic disclaimer, or a more detailed specific disclaimer. It was found that women did attend to the disclaimers. Specifically worded disclaimers directed visual attention towards target body areas, which resulted in increased body dissatisfaction, while state appearance comparison predicted increased body dissatisfaction. Further research is imperative to provide guidance on the most effective use of disclaimer labels.

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## Introduction

Body dissatisfaction, particularly in the form of a desire for thinness, is widespread among women across a range of western industrialised countries (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Swami et al., 2010). This spread has been attributed to the increasing globalisation of the mass media (Swami et al., 2010). There is supporting evidence, both correlational and experimental, that exposure to thin idealised images in the media can have a negative influence on women's body dissatisfaction, and is associated with disordered eating and depression (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Want, 2009). However, due to the small effect sizes observed, not all reviews have come to the same conclusion (Ferguson, 2013). Nevertheless, these negative effects have been shown to be more likely for women with pre-existing body dissatisfaction (Ferguson, 2013; Groesz et al., 2002). Accordingly, governments around the globe have begun to consider a

variety of interventions with the important goal of reducing these media-induced negative effects (Krawitz, 2014).

For example, in 2009, the Australian Government released the Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct which targeted the fashion, media, and advertising industries (Krawitz, 2014). This Code made several recommendations, the most relevant of which to the present research being that digitally altered images should not be used, and importantly, if images have been digitally altered, then this should be disclosed in some form of disclaimer. In March 2012, Israel became the first country to make it a legal requirement for the advertising industry to disclose when images have been digitally enhanced (Geuss, 2012; Krawitz, 2014). In April 2015, the French National Assembly lower house approved legislation requiring advertisements to carry disclaimers if models have been digitally altered, legislation that will now need to be passed by the Senate to become law (Charlton, 2015). Given the current widespread political interest in the implementation of some form of disclaimer on digitally altered images, it is of considerable urgency that research be conducted into the effectiveness of such measures.

The theoretical reasoning behind the recommended use of disclaimer labels is that they should inform or remind the reader that the image is unrealistic, and therefore not relevant as a target of social comparison (Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013). Social comparison on the basis of appearance, derived from the original proposition of social comparison theory by Festinger

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(1954), has been postulated as one of the main mechanisms contributing to negative body image. It is argued that women compare their appearance with the unrealistic media ideals, and when they do not 'measure up' following these upward comparisons, they feel worse about themselves and their body (Myers & Crowther, 2009; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Want, 2009). Accordingly, disclaimers of digital enhancement should lead women to compare less with the unrealistic media images, and as a result, not experience increased body dissatisfaction.

Although general media literacy programmes which encourage critical analysis of media imagery, including consideration of digital alteration, have been shown to successfully reduce negative body image effects (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Levine & Piran, 2004; Ogden & Sherwood, 2008; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001; Want, 2009; Watson & Vaughn, 2006; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005), as yet there is little evidence that disclaimer labels affixed to media images reduce body dissatisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, only the study by Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, and Hawkins (2012) has demonstrated positive benefit from the use of such disclaimers. That study found that disclaimer labels attached to fashion shoot spreads reduced the level of body dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, a small but growing body of evidence has accumulated to show that disclaimers of digital alteration have no overall beneficial impact on body image (Ata, Thompson, & Small, 2013; Harrison & Hefner, 2014; Tiggemann et al., 2013; Veldhuis, Konijn, & Seidell, 2014). Some researchers have even reported negative effects from the use of some forms of disclaimer. In particular, Bissell (2006) found that presenting a disclaimer of digital manipulation on a series of swimsuit model images, in combination with a visual literacy statement read before exposure, actually resulted in women reporting an increased desire to look like the models. In addition, Selimbegovic and Chatard (2015) reported that a disclaimer appended to airbrushed thin ideal images increased negative thought accessibility. Finally, of most relevance to the current research, Tiggemann et al. (2013) demonstrated that for women high in trait appearance comparison, specifically worded disclaimers attached to fashion magazine advertisements actually led to increased body dissatisfaction. The authors speculated that disclaimers which specify the digitally altered areas may promote more, rather than less, attention to the models' bodies.

In order to test this speculation, Bury, Tiggemann, and Slater (2014) used eye tracking technology to investigate the impact of digital alteration disclaimer labels on visual attention, i.e., on where women looked in fashion magazine advertisements. They found that specifically worded disclaimers (e.g., "Warning: This image has been digitally altered to lengthen and thin legs") directed gaze to the target body area (e.g., legs) mentioned in those disclaimers, with this effect being strongest for women high in trait appearance comparison. However, the disclaimers did not affect the number of fixations or percentage of time spent looking at the specified target body area. The authors suggested that a 45-second exposure time may have been too long and served to dilute the time spent looking at the target body area in reaction to the disclaimer labels. Thus, the first major aim of the present study was to test this suggestion. We chose to use a shorter exposure time of 15 s, more akin to natural viewing or 'flicking' through fashion magazines. It was predicted that under these conditions all indices of visual attention towards the target body areas would be higher for women who saw specifically worded disclaimers, compared to women who saw generically worded or no disclaimers.

The second major aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between visual attention to the target body areas and change in body dissatisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been investigated previously in the literature. It was predicted that more visual attention towards target body areas in the specific disclaimer label condition would correspond to increased

body dissatisfaction. In particular, it was expected that indices of visual attention (number of fixations on target body areas, percentage of time spent looking at target body areas, direction of gaze towards target body areas after reading the disclaimer for the first time) would predict an increase in body dissatisfaction. In addition, based on social comparison theory, we expected greater state appearance comparison to be reflected in increased visual attention towards target body areas, with state appearance comparison acting as a mechanism for increased body dissatisfaction. Finally, it was expected that the effect of disclaimer labels on all of visual attention, appearance comparison, and body dissatisfaction would be stronger for women higher in trait appearance comparison.

The specific hypotheses for the study were:

**Hypothesis 1.** Visual attention (fixations, time) to the disclaimer label area will be greater in both disclaimer label conditions than in the no disclaimer label condition.

**Hypothesis 2.** Visual attention (fixations, time) to the target body areas will be greater in the specific disclaimer label condition than in the generic and no disclaimer label conditions.

**Hypothesis 3.** Percentage of gaze directed to the target body areas following first fixation on the disclaimer label will be greater in the specific disclaimer label condition than in the generic disclaimer label condition.

**Hypothesis 4.** In the specific disclaimer label condition, greater visual attention (fixations, time, direction of gaze) towards the target body areas will result in increased body dissatisfaction.

**Hypothesis 5.** State appearance comparison will mediate any effect of disclaimer label condition on body dissatisfaction.

**Hypothesis 6.** State appearance comparison will be positively related to indices of visual attention (fixations, time, direction of gaze) towards the target body areas.

**Hypothesis 7.** Trait appearance comparison will moderate the effect of disclaimer label condition on visual attention, state appearance comparison, and body dissatisfaction, with all effects greater for participants higher in trait appearance comparison.

## Method

### Design

A between subjects experimental design was employed to investigate the effect of digital alteration disclaimer labels (no disclaimer, generic disclaimer, specific disclaimer) appended to thin ideal advertisements on visual attention and body dissatisfaction. Using eye tracking software we examined the visual attention directed to various parts of each advertisement that were of interest. Major dependent variables were the number of fixations and percentage of time spent looking at the disclaimers and body parts mentioned in the disclaimers, direction of gaze immediately after noticing the disclaimer for the first time, as well as body dissatisfaction. State appearance comparison was examined as a proposed mediator for change in body dissatisfaction. Trait appearance comparison was assessed as a potential moderator.

### Participants

Participants were 120 female undergraduate students from a South Australian university who reported English as their first language. They were randomly allocated to the three experimental conditions, subject to equal  $n$  ( $n=40$ ) per condition. Age ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of 20.51 ( $SD=3.03$ ). The average body mass index (BMI) of 22.74 ( $SD=4.14$ , range = 15.97–46.10)

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